

The Aspen Institute, an international non-profit think tank, named Indian journalist [Govindraj Ethiraj](#) as one of 2018's four McNulty Prize laureates. Govind has three media ventures -- *IndiSpend*, *BOOM*, and *FactChecker*.



Additionally, a story done by *IndiaSpend* on

Assam's [maternal](#) mortality in April 2017 won the 2nd prize at the Press Institute of India & International Committee of the Red Cross' annual awards.



Subscription-driven business news plat-

form *The Ken* raised a Series A investment of \$1.5 million in July 2018 led by Omidyar Network.

The NEWS Minute In September *The News Minute's* Theja Ram and Ragamalika Karthikeyan won the Laadli Media Awards for Gender Sensitivity 2017 in the Feature-Web category while Nitin Bhaskaran and Ragamalika won in the News Report-Web category.

The Centre for Science and Environment tested 65 food products available in the market for genetically modified (GM) ingredients and found GM genes in 32%

DownToEarth of the products, almost 80% of them imported. The report, published by *DownToEarth*, was carried by several mainstream media outlets, including the *The Business Standard* and *Livemint*. Six hours after [this report](#), the Food Safety Standards Authority of India released a statement that they were in the process of framing a law to regulate GM food.



Mook Badhir Mandal, the association for the hearing impaired in Vadodara, has made a [video](#) in sign language based on an article by

AltNews article. *AltNews* started publishing its stories in the Sunday edition of Divya Bhaskar in Gujarati and was also involved in training a second batch of journalists in various facets of fact-checking in association with Google News Lab and Data Leads.



The Better India now has an online retail wing - [The Better India Shop](#). The e-commerce arm of the story-telling plat-

form sells a range of eco-friendly, responsibly created products from merchants who follow ethical manufacturing practices. Each product and vendor has a story to tell, and you can read about the impact that they are making on every product page.

More on Page 2



Independent and Public Spirited Media Foundation

IPSMF news

Issue No.006

September 2018

The English media has so far been anointed the 'preponderant influencer' on national affairs. The Indian language media has been regarded as the poor cousin.

But that is now changing, and how. With mobility and purchasing power increasingly penetrating the hinterland, the numbers of Indian language internet users are beginning to count.

They are expected to account for nearly 75% of India's internet user base by 2021, according to a 2017 Google-KPMG report. The number of Indian language internet users is expected to reach 500 million-plus in the next two years. A Google estimate says that 95% of all current video consumption is in regional languages. No wonder then that new media players are turning to Indian languages.

We interview three of our **Grantees** who have just embarked on that mission.

'People are most comfortable in the mother tongue'

Shubhramshu Choudhary, a former BBC journalist in India and Knight International Journalism Fellow, launched *CGNet Swara* – a voice-based online portal that allows people in the forests of central tribal India to report local news by making a phone call. Most of the reports are in Gondi language – spoken by around two million people of the Gond tribe, living in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Telangana, Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh. We spoke to Shubhramshu about the challenges and the way forward for language-based citizen journalism. Excerpts from the interview:

What are the main challenges of a portal like yours which operates in Hindi and a rarely spoken language like Gondi?

Our main challenge is to reach people in remote areas and train them to be reporters. We use dance, drama and puppet shows to attract people and initiate them into reporting. We are trying to establish that even if people are not very literate, they can report in their own language, using their own phones, overcoming the constraints of traditional media. But this concept needs time to take firm roots.

Why do you think it is important for media to focus on languages of the



Shubhramshu Choudhary (left) speaking to a citizen-reporter.

hinterland?

People often understand mainstream languages, but they find it difficult to express themselves clearly in languages other than their mother tongues. If we want to increase the participation of these citizens in media, then we will have to create platforms in regional dialects.

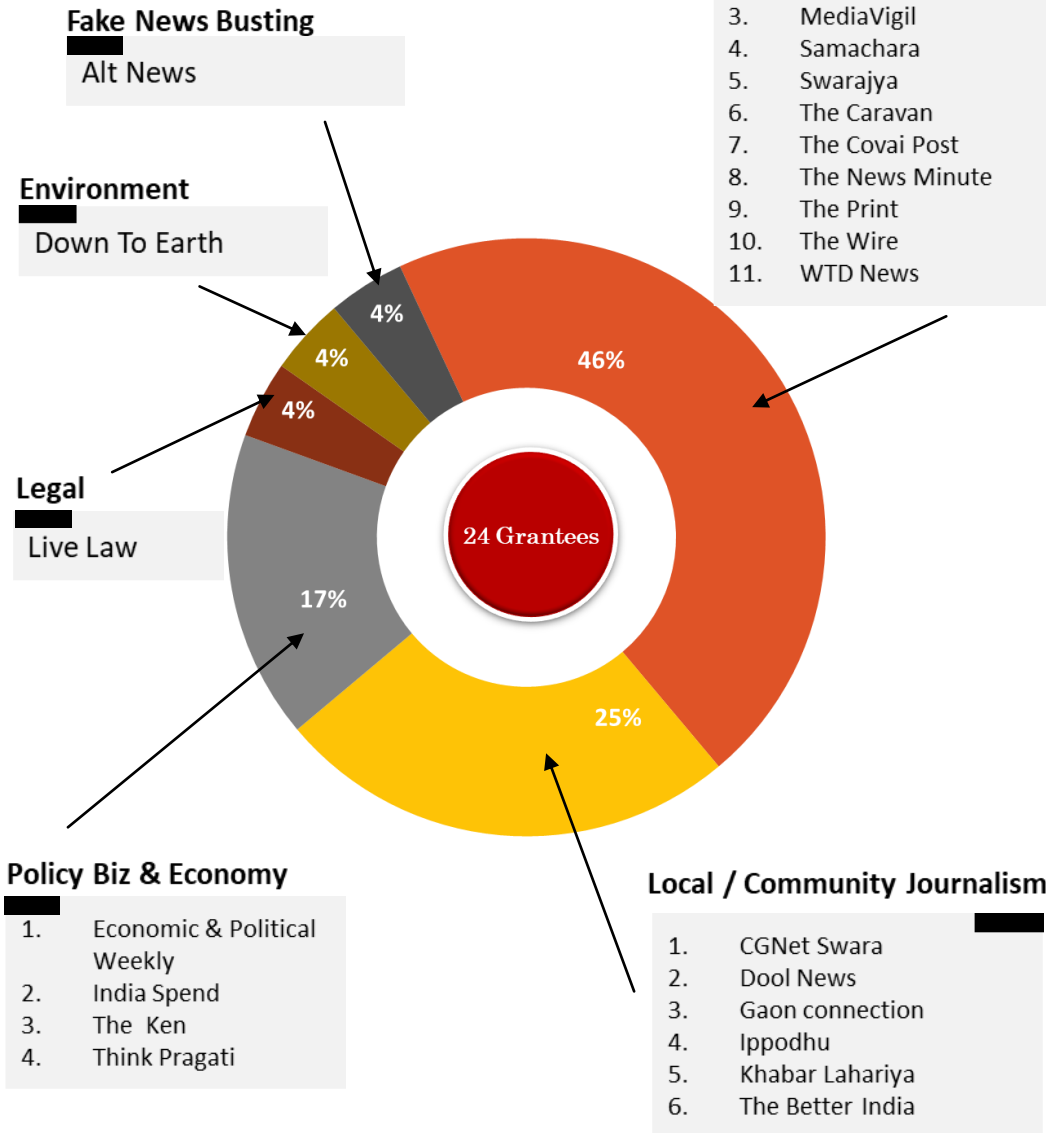
What according to you prevents mainstream media from addressing issues of media-dark regions in, for instance, Chhattisgarh?

Media-dark regions are also revenue-dark regions. So mainstream media is not interested in their issues. Government spends a lot of money on media, in places like Chhattisgarh, but traditional media is not interested in the painstaking and relatively costly task of real, ground-based reporting from these areas.

Using tech to dive deeper—Page 3



The Foundation's Interventions



AWARDS & ACHIEVEMENTS

Think Pragati's podcast ['The Seen and the Unseen'](#) was listed as a part of the curriculum for the Fall 2018 Course: Democracy, Development, and Conflict in South Asia at the University of California, San Diego.

Economic & Political WEEKLY

Three articles from the [Economic and Political Weekly](#) were cited in the Supreme Court's judgment that struck down Section 377.

(<http://bit.ly/2M5XT9T>)

(<http://bit.ly/2wLISGM>)

(<http://bit.ly/2NWcDd4>)

A Google News Lab co-ordinator [cited](#) EPW's Engage, a digital initiative for media promotion. EPW has also entered into a resource sharing partnership with Wikipedia Library. Wikipedia editors will be using EPW articles as references.



Legal News portal [Live Law](#) was shortlisted for the Agami Prize 2018 in the Citizenship Category.

Swarajya won a Gold at WAN IFRA South Asia Digital Media Awards 2018 for the [Best Reader Revenue Initiative](#).



TIMELINE OF GRANTS	
MEETINGS	GRANTEE NAMES
FY 2018-19: 1 Meeting	MediaVigil*, Imphal Free Press*, Azhimukham, The Print (Hindi and Science Edition)*
FY 2017-18: 7 Meetings	Swarajya, The Caravan, Alt News, Samachara, The Wire (Urdu and Marathi), Think Pragati, Dool News, Khabar Lahariya, The Print, Down to Earth, Covai Post*, Satyagraha*
FY 2016-17: 7 Meetings	The Better India, LiveLaw, Gaon Connection, Economic & Political Weekly, WTD News, The News Minute, The Wire (Hindi), The Ken
FY 2015-16: 5 Meetings	IndiaSpend, The Wire, CGNetSwara
TOTAL COMMITMENT – Rs 31.25 Cr	
*Entities yet to complete pre-funding formalities	



GRANTEE INTERVIEWS

Stories that work in English don't always connect in Hindi

The Better India, founded by Dhimant Parekh and Anuradha Kedia in 2008, is a digital platform that brings together technology, media and social consciousness to galvanise large-scale



social good. The platform, which started out in English, has now been launched in Hindi. Within a span of four months, the Hindi edition has achieved a monthly reach of 10 million readers.

In conversation with Dhimant Parekh.

As a news portal that started out in English, what made you foray into Hindi?

We plan to start in at least one more language this year

We have seen tremendous impact that we have catalysed by publishing solutions-oriented stories in English. It has led to changes in government policies, funding of urban slum schools, help farmers come out of poverty, fight drought and much more. We believe that if this large-scale impact is possible by only catering to the English audience,

imagine the kind of change we can bring about when we foray into regional languages - inspiring a larger section of our society to drive change. We had in-house talent in Hindi and so it was a natural extension.

What are the learnings from the Hindi thrust? Editorially, have you had to change anything?

The main learning has been that the stories that work for English audiences don't necessarily connect with the Hindi audience. So, the story selection had to change. Also, we learnt that content about literature and arts have a huge traction.

Are you planning editions in other languages?

Yes, we do plan to start in at least one more language this year and we are in the process of preparing for it.

Busting fake news in English alone was not enough

Founded in 2017, **AltNews**, is a fact-checking website started by former software engineer Pratik Sinha. It started out in English and very soon launched a Hindi edition.

In conversation with Pratik Sinha.

What made AltNews think of producing content in Hindi? What made you realise that there was an appetite for your content in the language space?



A majority of the rumours that we debunk on social media are often circulated through Facebook and Twitter mostly in Hindi. For a long time, we were counting on English to counter gross misinformation. However, we were not reaching the audiences that were affected by this misinformation. Hence, the decision to write, translate, our stories into Hindi.

After Hindi, we are keen to get into Gujarati

Are there any particular challenges when you deal with fake news in Hindi?

While we have garnered a huge audience in English, our current challenge is to create a space in Hindi as well. We are on the verge of going big with videos in Hindi.

Editorially, are there any changes you have had to make to tailor yourself to a Hindi-speaking audience?

We are trying to tailor Hindi content to the audience. For instance, simpler language and avoiding technical terms, as far as possible.

Are you planning to get into any other language?

We are keen to get into Gujarati, as we have in-house and intimate knowledge of the language. However, we would like to make our mark in Hindi before we wade into Gujarati.

Currently, we have 20,000 followers of our Hindi page and an average of about 75,000 views on our Hindi portal per month.

'We are using technology to dive deeper'

From Page 1

How does CGNET leverage technology? What remain key challenges?

We are now working on creating tools for machine-translations between Gondi and Hindi. Earlier, we were working on creating a standard dictionary for Gondi which is yet to be completed. It is difficult to do credible journalism in Gondi without creating a standard language. Gondi is the second-biggest tribal language of India. For other tribal languages, the situation is even more challenging.

We are trying to create a model of Voicebook, where people with no access to internet will be able to report. Some from the community who have access to internet, and speak the language, will be doing the gate-keeping or editing.

To reach areas where there are no mobile signals we use Bluetooth (christened Bultoo locally), which is now available on almost every phone. Villagers increasingly use Bluetooth to put out audio clips to share their views and report and we edit, curate and enable that to be shared with other mobile users, and thus, build a community

around it.

We need to create a business model out of these Voicebooks and 'Bultoo Radios', so that the concept can be sustainable in revenue terms rather than depend solely on grants. Once we have a critical mass of many Voicebooks, we can graduate to an entity akin to a 'Times of Rural India', which can be democratic, independent and representative. We get around 1,500 people calling us every day to listen to the stories. Around 150 people record a message or a song. After cross checking, editing and curating we put out 15 stories everyday.



‘We are not Right in a narrow sense’

Foundation Grantee **Swarajya Magazine’s** Editorial Director R Jagannathan spoke about the learnings from their journey and best practices for media initiatives. Below are excerpts from the interview.

As a self-avowed “big tent for liberal right-of-centre discourse”, how has Swarajya’s journey so far been, in terms of response, influence and impact?

We started out thinking we are a niche publication only to discover that we are, in fact, viewed as a much wider platform by a larger cross-section of people than we had originally imagined. Market-based economics and general pragmatism in economic thinking cannot obtain widespread support among the people without the natural constituency that supports this kind of thought - the cultural Right. We see ourselves as Right only in the sense of being pragmatic and rooted in our cultural ethos. We are not Right in any narrow-minded sense of the term.

Are there any critical learnings from your experience that could be a best practice for other Foundation partners?

One thing we learnt is that truth has many sides, and the current obsession with fake news or facts is narrow. What needs correcting is fake narratives - stories built on a one-sided acknowledgement of selective facts - like the ‘church attacks story’ based on four minor incidents in 2014, when the reality was 260 temples faced the same kind of attacks around the same time.

Another learning is that sending people to do ground reporting on issues is vital to developing a more truthful narrative about topics of public interest.

A third learning is that the solutions proffered by armchair economists won’t work without understanding the cultural milieu in which Indians operate. *Swarajya* takes this perspective into

account while deciding its stand on issues.

Why do you think there are more left-of-centre media entities in India?

One is the Right has so far not been able to connect its free-market economics to benefits that the poor can understand. This gap between ideology and delivery of results is what the Right needs to bridge - and it is hard work. It is easier

for the Left to pretend to be saviours of the poor than the Right, which advocates hard work and more difficult policy choices.

The second reason is crony capital. Big business prefers to back the Left since they provide political cover in case they get into trouble. The Right is anyway pro-business. Seventy years of Congress rule has left the Left dominating academia and various intellectual spaces. The Lutyens Left is also closely aligned with the American Left, making them seem more legitimate than the rest.

How far has Swarajya contributed in remedying this perceived skew? And, what more can be done?

We have established proof of concept. The key is more funding for entities like ours, and also identifying the right kind of talent.



How Grantees dealt with major events

Over the last three months, two news events garnered the maximum amount of media and reader attention – the abolition of Section 377 and the arrests of activists in the Bhima-Koregaon case. The Foundation’s Grantees highlighted different perspectives and implications of these news events.

Bhima-Koregaon

- In this case as well, *LiveLaw’s* articles and social media [updates](#) gathered a huge response. Their coverage included a [detailed account](#) from of the courtroom hearings.
- *The Print’s* article [highlighted](#) that of 10 activists arrested for Bhima-Koregaon violence, nine names weren’t even in the Pune Police FIR. The platform’s ‘[talk-point](#)’ section also discussed whether these arrests were aimed at discrediting human rights defenders or real national security fears.
- *The Caravan* published a [report](#) on the Pune rural police-appointed committee’s findings, headed by the city’s deputy mayor Siddharth Dhende, which seemingly contradicted the police version.

- *IndiaSpend* produced a data-based [analysis](#), revealing that 67% cases under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967, ended in acquittal/discharge.
- *The Wire’s* editorials discussed how the [atrocities](#) in the name of ‘nationalism’ offer history lessons beyond Bhima Koregaon and did a detailed write-up on the five arrested in the [case](#).

Section 377

- Legal news portal *LiveLaw* tweeted the court proceedings. The portal’s tweets/reports and its coverage was followed-up and cited by other leading news portals. *LiveLaw* also ran several editorials on the [impact](#) of this landmark judgment on [heterosexual relationships](#) in India.
- *The Print* also carried varying perspectives prior to and post this judgment – the articles discussed [BJP’s](#) oscillation over Section 377 over the years, and how political parties are passing the buck to the courts for simple [decisions](#).
- *The Caravan* [interviewed](#) advocate

Menaka Guruswamy, who argued on behalf of petitioners from the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi.

- *Swarajya’s* editorial spoke about evolving a uniquely [Hindu perspective](#) on LGBT rights.
- *Dool News* produced a short [video](#) showcasing the joy of LGBTQ activists and supporters, and also summarized the historic struggle of the community.
- Prior to the judgment, *Think Pragati’s* editorials discussed how homosexuality was always treated as a [taboo](#) in India and how the Supreme Court should not – and need not – get into the question of what forms of sexual identity or orientation are ‘natural’ in order to find Section 377 IPC [unconstitutional](#). Editor Amit Verma’s podcast discussed what it is to grow up gay in a deeply [homophobic country](#).
- *The News Minute* wrote on how the verdict must give way to [lessons](#) in inclusion for mental-health professionals.
- *The Wire* also [wrote](#) on how the verdict should be treated as a marker of evolution of mental-health rights.